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A HISTORY OF THE NTL INSTITUTE FOR APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, 1947-1986

Boston University Ed.D. 1986

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

A HISTORY OF THE NTL INSTITUTE FOR APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, 1947-1986

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

1986

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A HISTORY OF THE NTL INSTITUTE FOR APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, 1947-1986

(Order No.)

JERROLD I. HIRSCH

Boston University, School of Education, 1986

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Abstract

The problem of this thesis was to present a case history of the National Training Laboratories (NTL). Specific issues were: How and why did it come about? What were the social forces that influenced its success in the 1950s and 1960s? What were the forces that led to the crisis that erupted in 1970? How did NTL solve its crisis? What sort of organization did NTL become?

NTL was established for the purposes of incorporating democratic procedures and ethos into personal and social interaction, and to study these processes using social scientific methodology. The T-group was discovered in a human relations laboratory when group participants were included on feedback sessions. T-groups became the center of NTL laboratories. They were used in human relations, personal development, and organizational development (OD). NTL was incorporated in 1950 under the division of Adult Education of the National Education Association.

NTL began by offering summer labs in Bethel, Maine.

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Soon it expanded consulting efforts to organizations requiring help in human relations. NTL expanded throughout the 1950s, collecting a large number of eminent scholars in the behavioral and social sciences. In the mid-1950s, the major thrust of NTL was in organizational development. In the late 1950s, personal development labs became the major focus. This trend continued throughout the 1960s.

In the 1960s, NTL became involved in the counterculture and became sensitized to issues of racism. In the 1970s, it became concerned with feminist issues as well. The 1960s was a period of phenomenal growth for NTL, inflating expectations of the leadership.

In the 1970s, NTL faced a financial and organizational crisis that lasted until 1975. In 1975, NTL was democratized and restructured to reduce white male domination and ensure equal representation of Blacks and women. From then until 1986, it has been a stable, democratically participatory organization.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A significant amount of patience, love and support was shown by my family; my wife, Rosalyn and three sons, Michael, Bradley, and David, through the completion of this project. There were periods of isolation and solitude and literally hundreds of hours and miles spent away from my home.

Dr. Kenneth D. Benne, Theodore W. Berenson Professor of Human Relations Emeritus of Boston University suggested the idea for the project and encouraged me to approach the NTL Institute for the research. While attending Boston University, Dr. Paul Nash, Dr. A. Cornelia Sheehan, and Dr. Stuart Marshall extended their time and energy that provided the freedom for creativity throughout this study.

A special note of appreciation for the grant for this study to Mrs. Edith W. Seashore Past President of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science 1975 - 1979, and Mr. Ray E. Gibbons the Vice-President of Finance under her administration.

My visit to the NTL Summer Laboratories in Bethel, Maine in July, 1978 and the personal interviews with Dr. Leland P. Bradford and his wife Mrs. Martha Bradford, and Dr. Kenneth D. Benne at their summer homes in Center Lovell, Maine were very special and precious moments.

The following is a listing of individuals and institutions that aided in the writing of this project.

Dr. Vladimir A. Dupre, Past President NTL Institute 1970 - 1974.

Dr. Harold L. Hodgkinson, Past President NTL Institute 1979 - 1983

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Dr. Leland P. Bradford
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Dr. Ronald Lippitt
Dr. Barry Oshry
Dr. Charles Seashore
Mrs. Edith Seashore
Dr. Robert Tannenbaum
Citizens of Bethel, Maine

Mr gratitude to my professional colleagues, teachers and friends especially to Dr. Martha L. Farmer my colleague and friend who was there from the very beginning at the City College.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> [The job of resolving social conflicts] demands from the social scientists an utmost amount of courage. It needs courage as Plato defines it: "Wisdom concerning dangers." It needs the best of what the best among us can give, and the help of everybody.[1]

The rise of totalitarian ideologies in Western Europe profoundly affected the thinking of Kurt Lewin, the founder of the organization that became the National Training Laboratories (NTL).[2] He was himself an emigrê from Hitler's Germany, fleeing the coming Holocaust. The rise of Stalinism in Russia was also cause for alarm. Europe in the decade prior to the Second World War seemed to be succumbing to totalitarian "isms." Lewin was a democrat; his later writings were concerned with issues of freedom and authority.

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[1] Kurt Lewin, "Resolving Social Conflicts," in G. Lewin, Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics. (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), p. 216.

[2] NTL was founded as the National Training Laboratory in Group Development (NTLGD) in 1947. In 1954, it was renamed National Training Laboratories. In 1969 it was again renamed NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. Throughout its history, it has been referred to as "NTL" both inside and outside the organization. Therefore, in the text of this document, the organization will be referred to as NTL.

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He understood that freedom was not the natural state of humanity, but that it had to be fostered, taught, and inculcated.[3] He also understood that freedom and domination were products of group interactions; that attitudes toward obedience and authority, freedom and liberty were conveyed through cultural media.

After leaving Germany in 1932, Lewin came to the United States, where he taught at Stanford and Cornell during the subsequent three years.[4] Upon establishing permanent residence in 1935, Lewin became a professor of child psychology at the State University of Iowa.[5] At Iowa State, Ronald Lippitt, one of the three acknowledged founders of NTL -- the other two were Kenneth Benne and Leland Bradford -- became a graduate assistant to Lewin. It was Lippitt who introduced Benne and Bradford to Lewin and his ideas.[6]

In the wake of the Second World War, Kurt Lewin set out to develop a laboratory in which social interaction, the effects of freedom and domination, and group influences could be studied for the purpose of socially engineering a

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[3] Ibid.

[4] cf. Melvin H. Marx and William Hillix, Systems and Theories in Psychology (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Leland P. Bradford, National Training Laboratories -- Its History: 1947-1970. (Bethel, ME: NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1974).

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more democratic social order.[7] Lewin believed that the social sciences could be used to help the species resolve problems of intergroup relations by studying the effects of various leadership styles and followership responses and generalizing them to theories of the development of democratic behavior.[8]

If Lewin was the father of NTL, then Ronald Lippitt, Kenneth Benne, and (especially) Leland Bradford were its mothers. They midwifed it and nurtured it to full maturity. If the analogy can be carried a bit further, having mothered it, they let it go to seek its own future. What it grew into would have probably not pleased the father. That growth and development is the central focus of this thesis.

NTL, at its inception at Lewin's Research Center for Group Dynamics in 1945 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was directed at the resolution of intergroup conflicts, the development of democratic leadership, and the scientific study of both. As NTL grew and developed, it evolved the now-famous T-group and coined the term, "sensitivity training." In the 1950s, it had spread the gospel of organizational development (OD) through the creation of sensitive, democratic leadership. It was at the forefront of the human relations school of organization at this time. In the mid-1960s, it was at the center of what had become

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[7] Lewin, Resolving Social Conflicts, pp. 38-39.

[8] Ibid., pp. 48-51.

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the "human potential" and "humanistic psychology" movements.

The number of those who participated in and were influenced by NTL are legion. By the late 1960s, anyone claiming luminary status in the new movements in psychology had to evince participation in NTL at some level. As was the case with organizations in the 1960s that became caught up in the social movements of minorities, women and the counterculture of the decade, NTL assumed an almost mythical status as an agent of the new order.

As it was, the "Age of Aquarius" was announced prematurely. With the movements in decline in the early 1970s and with a full-blown organizational crisis in leadership succession, NTL found itself in a struggle for its survival. The crisis, which had its basis in fiscal problems created by the explosive growth of the 1960s and consequent overextension of resources, lasted several years. Not only was the problem to put the organization on a sound fiscal footing and operate on business procedures, but the soul of the organization had to be searched and its purpose and mission had to be reconceptualized.

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Statement of the Problem

Kenneth Benne wrote a document in 1953 entitled, "Why NTL?" In this remarkable document, he concluded:

> In clarifying the problem, "Why NTL?" we need to see what we do here against a framework of social problems demanding the attention of all of us, against a framework of democratic values threatened by anxious efforts to solve these problems by methods inconsistent with democratic be-

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> lief and ideals, against a recognition of practically unapplied knowledge and methodology from the social sciences. In this perspective we find a vantage point from which to examine and assess intelligently the purposes of NTL.9

This study will elucidate the question, "Why NTL?" from the perspective of an outsider to NTL by examining it in its historical context from its inception until the 1980s. NTL was conceived as an attempt at the solution of major social problems. As such, it was vulnerable to the winds of social change, which altered it as it sought to change the society of which it was part. This study is a case history of an organization that embodied the loftiest aspirations of its founders and was a major agent of social change, but not in the ways in which its founders ever envisioned.

NTL was predicated on the perceived fact that the one constant in human life was change. The organization was dedicated to the proposition that social change had to be done intelligently, not by dint of force, political manipulation, or the greed of economic exploitation.[10] NTL was conceived as an organization dedicated to the development of the mechanisms of collaborative, cooperative, intelligent, and scientifically verified changes in human relations. The survival of democratic values and purposive social change

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9 Kenneth Benne, "Why NTL?" In H. Fildey and R. Vandiver, NTL Ethics and Methodology. (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1958).

10 Kenneth Benne, "Democratic Ethics and Human Engineering," in Fildey and Vandiver, NTL.

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lay in the practical application of the learnings of the social sciences:

> [T]he impending tragedy of the present human situation complies serious devotion among men of good will to the development and spread of a tested methodology of planned change in human relationships. Promising "young" scientific disciplines of group and personal therapy, of applied anthropology, of group dynamics, of public opinion analysis, etc. are available to give new hope and guidance to the venture.11

What happened to this organization that saw itself as a bulwark against totalitarianism, a carrier of liberal democratic values, a trainer of humans to cope with the large problems of "human relations"? What is its history? Why did it change in the ways it did? What were the social forces that affected its operation, development, and constituencies? To what extent did it remain true to its founders' vision, and to what extent did it betray that vision, and why were certain courses of action taken? On what basis can the history of NTL be periodized and divided into comprehensible units? The purpose of this study is to explore the history of NTL with these questions in mind.

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Significance of the Problem

The importance of NTL in the history of the behavioral and social sciences has already been alluded to. T-groups and sensitivity training have generated a great deal

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11 Ibid, p. 3.

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of research over the periods they have been applied to the problems of intergroup relations, military leadership, organizational development, and personal development. The idea of planned change, which was one of the moving forces in NTL is a central issue in management, decision-making, organizational theory, and human resource development. Not only did the T-group and sensitivity training provide opportunities for research, but they also became tools in the alteration of human subjectivity: for out of them arose the encounter group, the sensory awareness group, and any number of other types of group therapies that involved the revelation of aspects of self that were prevented in conventional social relations.

Additional significance can be attributed to NTL because of its ability to straddle so many contradictions. It was an organization of primarily academics who wished to extend their praxis to the world beyond the ivory tower. It was constituted as a bridge between social science and social action. It occupied a unique place between the behavioral and social sciences. For all these reasons, NTL is worthy of an in-depth study from the outside.

NTL, being as it was the product of academicians and concerned intellectuals, created its own substantial literature. Leland Bradford, founder and director from its incep-

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tion until 1970, has compiled a history of the organization.[12] The history is a compilation of sources and a narrative of the internal workings of the organization. There is no attempt to analyze NTL in light of its social context, nor is there a concerted effort to analyze its development beyond the years in which Bradford was director. It is this neglected aspect of NTL that this thesis proposes to examine.

Method

This thesis employs the historical case study approach to the study of NTL. The historical case study is a qualitative methodology which employs the following data gathering techniques:

1. review of the professional literature concerning the organization's growth and development;
2. polling the membership of the organization;
3. interviewing the leadership;
4. participant-observation of the organization's activities; and
5. review of the organization's documents, internal memoranda, position papers, journals, and research monographs.

To this end, the researcher did the following:

1. several computer-search literature reviews were

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[12] Bradford, NTL.

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conducted, surveying social science serials, including the psychological abstracts, sociological abstracts, business data base and ERIC, for information on NTL, T-groups, and sensitivity training. The overwhelming majority of the literature contained commentary and research on the effectiveness of T-groups and sensitivity training on such factors as leadership training, cognitive and affective changes, and group solidarity. There was practically nothing on NTL as an organization.

2. One hundred letters were sent to a random sample of current members of NTL (see Appendix A for specimen letter). They were asked to respond to the following questions:

a. As you recall, what changes occurred in the fundamental nature of NTL over the years? When, why and how did these occur?

b. What important changes have occurred in the administration of the organization?

c. Could you reflect on the nature of the research and programmatic thrusts of NTL?

d. Is there a statement that you would like to make at this time for the record?

Of the 100 letters sent out, 20 were returned with responses. Of the 20 responses, only 10 were complete enough to be used in the study. The other ten were refusals to participate, or apologies for not being able to comply with the request. Included in the ten usable responses was a "Systems Letter," written in 1979 by Barry Oshry at a

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point of crisis in his relationship with NTL, consisting of 89 pages of double-spaced, typewritten text. It is remarkable in that it reflects major concerns of many of NTL participants. It demonstrates the effects of the emphases on personal growth and self-revelation on the issues of democratic behavior and social dominstion. Where applicable, materials from the letters will be included in the analysis.

3. Open-ended interviews were conducted by the researcher with founder Leland Bradford and Bradford's wife, Martha; Vladimir Dupre; Elsie Cross, member of the NTL Board of Trustees and NTL member since 1970; Murray Horwitz, an associate of Kurt Lewin, who had been involved in NTL since its inception; Edith and Charles Seashore, both of whom were heavily involved with NTL since the mid-1950s, with Charles being one of three directors during the organizational crisis in 1970 and Edith becoming president of the organization from 1975 to 1979; Robert E. Lee, an executive with Exxon responsible for organizational development and a NTL trainer with continuous contact with NTL since the early 1950s; Ray Gibbons, NTL Vice-President of Finance since 1967; and two citizens named Mary Valentine and Carolyn Brooks of Bethel, Maine, where the laboratories were located. The interviews were recorded on cassette tape.

The interviews were conducted on an informal basis, without use of an interview schedule. An oral history approach was used in which the respondent was allowed to discuss NTL, his or her experiences in it, express opinions

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